Train Race

Michaela Shea-Gander

We always knew when the train was coming. Even before we heard the low rumble and the screeching signal, we could feel the tremors in the ground, rising up through our bare feet and legs, goosebumps standing on edge. Usually, we'd be outside, soaking up the last few hours of the torrid summer sunshine. Sometimes, though, we'd be on Grandma's screened-in porch, sitting tightly in the stiff white wicker furniture, sipping iced tea or lemonade or Diet Coke for Bridget, because once she was diagnosed with diabetes she had to limit her sugar intake. We would sit with our restless limbs and our sun-kissed skin, waiting for the first one of us to sense it to jump up with a start and scream, "It's coming!" We'd be out of our seats in an instant and out the cracked screen door, always letting it bang shut even though we were told not to every time. We'd race across the lawn, bare feet slamming parched grass until we reached the edge of the cliff at the end of the yard, where the dense overgrown shrubbery threatened to trespass on my grandma's meticulous lawn. There, we would wait for the steel beast, staring at the tracks below, watching the boats float serenely across the Connecticut river that seemed just out of reach.

When the train passed by, I always imagined I could see people looking out the window, even though the train was often a freight train that held no passengers. I'd focus my eyes as hard as I could on each car, trying to soak in as many details as I could take in. I wanted to know where the trains were going and for how long, and I'd

imagine myself running down the bank and jumping on the back of one, letting it take me out of the small town I'd lived in my entire life. I'd never been on a train before, and I was itching to sit by the window and let the world pass by, surrounded by mysterious strangers who I imagined would give wise advice and share stories about their travels. I'd then let my eyes unfocus, a blur of black and green and red and brown and graffiti of every color. We'd count the number of cars; once, we counted 120, our record. It was our evening ritual at Grandma's house, a constant in the summers of our uncertain lives.

When we were young, the grown-ups would call me and my cousin Philip "two peas in a pod." We were both shy around the adults, sneaking sly smiles from behind our mothers' legs, but when it was just us, we became wizards and fairies and monster-fighters. As a child, his hair was as fair and fine as the corn silk we'd throw at each other as we husked corn on the porch, a chore that became a game. Mine was the burnt orange of a forest fire, untamed and unruly. Our eyes were identical shades of blue, the color of the ocean at dawn, wide with curiosity. We were the pickiest eaters of the group, vegetarians who preferred plain pasta to vegetables. We made various pacts: to "save" the neighbor's black cat and keep it for our ourselves, to persuade the grown-ups to serve spaghetti for Thanksgiving dinner, to never grow up. One time I kissed his cheek without warning, the boldness making us both giggle and blush and retreat back to the porch, where we kept our secret safe.

There were four of us: Bridget, my sister, was the eldest, our cousin Nellie was two years older than me, and her brother Philip, a year younger. They lived up north, in Middlebury, but would make the two-hour drive a few times a season. There were four of us until I turned seven and our cousin Ella was born. Bridget got older and stopped being interested in the trains. She started talking to the grown-ups, actually conversing instead of just nodding her head shyly like I did. She talked about her dreams of being a doctor and whatever book she was currently reading and her ski-racing success. It was me and Nellie and Philip until Nellie got bored of chasing trains, preferring to stay inside and write poetry and listen to women wailing about love on her purple portable radio. Once, she told me that she needed to focus on the "real world," not games or magic, and the next time I watched the train roll by it seemed duller, like I was watching from behind a thick glass screen. Then Philip started hanging out by himself upstairs on the computer, playing games that involved guns and war and gold, and I was left with either the grown-ups or baby Ella, who couldn't talk yet but loved to pull on my twin braids so hard my scalp would throb for days.

Then, later, Bridget left for college and started working more during the summer and Nellie and Philip visited less often, their parents' divorce complicating matters, as divorce always does. We were all older, and I started to participate in grown-up conversations about race and politics and my future as a writer or a photographer for National Geographic, and Nellie went to college, and Philip still barely came downstairs when they visited, a drifting apart that seemed inevitable at

the time. It felt strange when I saw him, like the things we had in common had dissipated, leaving us with strained, awkward smiles. "He's always had trouble making friends," the adults would whisper, louder than they thought they were being. Then my own parents got divorced when I was eighteen, and family events at Grandma's grew smaller and smaller, and then I went to college, far away in Ohio, and Philip went to college close to home for a few days before dropping out, and the air became thick with tension at holidays. Then we found out Philip was ordering prescription pills online. When my mother told me, I laughed out of shock. "Pills?" I remember saying, "You can buy pills online?" I guess I knew then that you could buy drugs online; what I couldn't fathom was that Philip, who was always so quiet and kept to himself, who I had never seen even drink a beer, was doing drugs.

After that, we didn't see Philip much at all, though he was staying at the rehab center in my town. My grandma would mention seeing him, how his face seemed thinner and how he seemed more tired, but she didn't know how bad it had gotten. My mom would tell me that every time she drove by the Brattleboro Retreat Center, she expected to see him, smoking on the lawn outside with the others. He was in and out so often that I lost track of where he was. While I was having roommate trouble about a boy we both liked, his roommate got kicked out for being aggressive. While I was attending classes like Issues in Feminism and Creative Writing, Philip was attending group therapy, learning how to cope with withdrawal. While I was partying until 2:00am, Philip had a curfew, with nowhere really to go, anyway. It's funny how

easy it is to lose track of someone, how details and memories blur together, how you start taking "everything is fine" as the truth because sometimes it's easier that way. Somewhere along the line, pills turned into heroin, a darker turn I couldn't fathom. It suddenly seemed like the entire country was having this problem, an issue that always seemed so distant from my life. The news in both Ohio and Vermont broadcasted images of people passed out, overdosed in a parking lot or a park. Overdoses and deaths from heroin, a drug that I had barely heard of before, seemed to skyrocket. The worst was the judgement I'd hear from almost everyone. "Druggies," they'd say. "Good-for- nothing, undeserving, pathetic druggies."

During my sophomore fall, I wrote a poem about Philip for my Creative Writing class. I hadn't seen him in a while, and I'm not exactly sure what inspired me to write it. Nostalgia, maybe, and the uneasiness that comes with turning twenty. I wrote about my grandma's porch and the sprint to the train and the orange glow we'd see on the river after dark that we were convinced were will-o'-the-wisps. I never meant to show him the poem; we weren't close anymore, and I was shy about my writing. I titled the piece "Train Race."

I remember the last time I saw Philip, around Thanksgiving, how after in the car my mother remarked that she thought he looked better, that she thought he seemed fine. He did look healthier, like he had gained weight, and he seemed more energetic. I didn't think about him too much, though. I was preoccupied with finals and winter break plans and Christmas shopping. I remember thinking that everything

would be fine, that there was no other comprehensible option, that getting help always helped.

I was in the car with my mother and her boyfriend at the time when I found out, during winter break of my sophomore year of college. We were driving back from New York City, a trip where I was cranky most of the time due to the boyfriend's apprehension of subways, forcing us to walk what seemed like hundreds of blocks in the biting cold. I was going back to school in less than a week, nervous and angsty about a room change and a falling-out with a friend. I had my headphones in, blocking out the sound of the jazz music my mother's boyfriend always played that I found pretentious. My mother answered her phone, sounding confused, and in a split second the world as I knew it was turned on its head. It was my father, who never called with good news, who rarely called at all anymore, now that he was newly married. When she turned around to face me, I could tell something was wrong. I quickly removed my headphones as she told me that Philip was dead.

A heroin overdose, alone in a hotel room in Boston. He had been returning from Colorado, a trip to see a close friend. He had called my aunt to tell her he was staying over in Boston for a night before returning to Vermont. He told her he was going to visit the aquarium. I didn't cry until I got home and saw the framed picture in my childhood bedroom of us together in a leaf pile in my grandma's yard, all carefree smiles and pudgy toddler fingers, waiting for the train race.

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Philip stood on the marshy shoreline of the pond while I splashed him, wearing his green swim trunks with the turtle pattern. "Come on!" I said, throwing my body into the water to create crystal gems of water that shot up and out like a rocket before sinking back into the now turbulent water. "I can't swim," he said, looking away over at his mother, as if asking for an explanation. "Really?" I said. "I learned how to swim when I was six!" Though that was a lie, and I had only learned to swim just last year, my eight-year-old self still had bragging rights. "What do you do when you go to the ocean?" My family's summer vacation at the Outer Banks was always the most exciting part of my year, and though I was scared of sharks and fish and large waves, I loved to wade in the shallow tide pools. "I've never been to the ocean" he said softly. "Well, maybe next time you can come!" I spun my hands out in a circle, creating a wall of diamond droplets between us.

Two years after it happened, on a black sand beach in Raglan, New Zealand, the farthest I had ever been from home, I thought about him. Something about the black rocky expanse of the beach and the emerald water gave me the feeling that I was on another planet entirely. It was early, sunrise, and I was alone, relishing the time apart from the group of twelve others I spent every waking moment with. Standing knee-deep in the lukewarm salt water, I felt my chest cave in. The thought came to me like a breeze, soft at first, then picking up into a pounding wind: Philip had never seen

the ocean, and he never would. I longed to transport to two years ago, to take him here, as if the water could heal him, could save him. I should have tried harder, been better at noticing what was happening before it was too late. I think about the red flags: the hiding upstairs, his time on the internet, his difficulty connecting with others his age. What if I had gone upstairs, asked him how to play his games, asked him how he was doing more often? I wanted to shake him and scream, to show him that we did care, we did notice. We should have all tried harder, been better. We should have taken him to the ocean.

It took a long time for my anger to dissipate. Sometimes it still rises up when I think about whoever sold a naive nineteen-year-old heroin. I knew it was someone he met in rehab, and I think that's what made me so angry. I wonder if they knew they were handing my cousin a death sentence. It's not that simple though, nothing ever is. Addiction runs through my family like a curse; the cigarettes that killed my grandpa, the empty bottles in my father's office that felt like a dirty secret even at eleven. My anger hasn't left, it's shifted, but it's difficult to find answers when there's nobody to blame.

There are only four of us now, and none of us chase the trains anymore. When I visit my grandma's house, I sit tightly in the white wicker furniture, limbs longer but just as restless. I drink lemonade or iced tea or wine, sometimes, and converse with the grown-ups, who count me as one of them even though I don't feel like it yet. Each

time the train comes, I am filled with the urge to fly to the edge of the yard and count the cars as they speed by, but I never do.

Mostly, I long to board the train, to let it take me somewhere where the memories don't sting, somewhere where Philip didn't use heroin that night, or at all, somewhere where we never stopped playing with magic, where a train passing through could still be enthralling.

In some ways, I know I've started to let go, as my visits become short and sparser, my future in a far-off city becoming increasingly tangible. Sometimes when I hear the low rumble of a train, I picture Philip sitting by the window, watching the world go by in a blur of green and blue and brown, heading toward the ocean.